3: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1936) 1950 FL11 Luo FL11

MARRIAGE CUSTOMS OF THE LUO OF KENYA

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THIS paper forms part of a short general account of the Luo based on a rapid survey made in 1936. The survey was financed by the Leverhulme Grants Committee. An earlier part, describing the political structure of the Luo, has recently appeared in another journal.[1]

Apart from information provided by Father Hartmann[2] and a fuller account by Mr. K. C. Shaw,[3] early accounts of Luo marriage are slight, and in some cases misleading. Mr. Shaw's account covers a good part of the ground covered by the present paper, but it is useful to have two independent accounts, especially as both were written from information obtained through interpreters. When I went to Kenya I did not expect to visit the Luo and I had not therefore read Mr. Shaw's article. Mr. Shaw and I disagree in a number of particulars in the overlapping parts of our papers. It does not follow from this that either of us is wrong in our statements because, as Mr. Shaw points out, there is some variation in local custom in the different tribes of Luoland. My own information on this particular subject was mostly obtained from the Alego tribe of Central Kavirondo. In the main I have followed the account given me by Pastor Ezekiel of that tribe. In doing so I have omitted much detail.

Simbo

Courtship and marriage are intimately connected with the custom of making love to girls (*ndo*) in the *simbo* or bachelors' dormitory, the hut nearest to the entrance to a Luo homestead. Youths arrange with girls to visit them there at night, and when a youth is visited by one of his sweethearts the other young men of the home sleep elsewhere. He plays with the girl and has intercourse between her thighs and they sleep together. He must not penetrate her—that is regarded as shameful, and it will be known on the day of her marriage. If a girl comes from a distance to visit her lover she may spend several nights with him in the *simbo*. A girl may have several lovers in different homesteads whom she visits from time to time; she pleases herself in these matters. The young men will not quarrel about her, nor will her father and brothers interfere in her love affairs. She may continue the practice throughout the stages of her marriage to another man right up to the *rim*, the final ceremony of marriage. I was told that a girl does not usually visit the *simbo* more often than once or twice a month. Occasionally the lover employs a harpist to entertain the girl and his friends on one of her visits, and there is singing and dancing. Between the songs youths, and sometimes girls also, stand up and boast of their virtues, of the number of their friends and sweethearts, of their wealth, and of their families and lineages; and when they have finished they throw a gift to the harpist, maybe to-day a shilling. Other youths then try to outdo them in boasts and generosity.

[1] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Luo Tribes and Clans', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 1949.

[2] M. Hartmann, 'Some Customs of the Luwo (or Nilotic Kavirondo) living in South Kavirondo', *Anthropos*, 1908.

[3] K. C. Shaw, 'Some Preliminary Notes on Luo Marriage Customs', *J.E.A. & U.N.H.S.*, 1950.

10: Roscoe M-5 (ca. 1900)1915
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shave their heads, taking care to keep separate the hair which is cut off. This hair is hidden away in some place near, by preference in a rat-hole or in some hole where it is not likely to be found again. 846

Birth of twins. At the birth of twins the parents remain together in one house for ten days, and the midwife waits on them. When this time of seclusion ends, a small pot of blood is drawn from the neck of an ox cooked and given to the parents to eat. After the meal they are escorted to the river, washed, and their heads shaved. Their house is then swept and the floor smeared with cow-dung and friends come and dance in the village and drink beer. The mother takes the twins a round of visits which lasts several days, but she returns home each night to sleep. At each house she visits the people give her presents of grain. When the visits have been made the mother brews beer with the grain she has received in presents, and her friends again gather to dance and to drink the beer. 845 [431]

Initiation ceremonies. Children live in the same village with their parents and under their control. Until marriage they lead a free and happy life, with few wants and cares. The boys assist in herding cattle, and the girls help their mothers in their fields and also carry wood and water and assist in cooking. Their duties are light and there is no force beyond argument used to make them work. Children imitate their elders in seeking ornaments to wear and in smearing their bodies with oil and red or white paint. When they come to the age of puberty, their four front teeth in the lower jaw are extracted and they are initiated in the customs of the clan. For four days they remain in the house, after which they go about visiting their friends and receive presents of fowls. Girls go through the same ceremony as boys in having their teeth extracted, but, in addition, their bodies are scarified on the sides and back. Should there be excessive haemorrhage when teeth are extracted, the parents send to the man who has the bracelets of the deceased person after whom the boy is named and borrow them, and the youth wears them until the bleeding ceases. When the ceremony of extracting the teeth is over, the boys are sent to live in the boys' quarters 857 [302] 881 304 [431] [752] 882

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882 with the youths of the village, and girls go to the young women's quarters, and both cease to live in the house of their parents. From this time until marriage these young people live in their communities and have much freedom, their morals not being considered, but each following the leading of natural impulse.

11: Hartmann M-5 (ca. 1920)1928 FL11 Luo FL11

945 smears a little clay in front of both ears of all the people who come to the feast, and
852 each of them do the same to the mother in return. All of them decorate their necks
and waist with *bwombwe*, a creeping plant; then they start a most immodest dance;
[831 scarcely covered with their goatskins they simulate the copula, and the vilest songs,
786] which no decent person could ever listen to. After the dance they enter the kraal
535] where food is ready. Then they have the beer. The relations of the woman stay over for the night, but all the others go home.

852 *Mirnd Kumu* is a similar dance, which is indulged in, when a woman has
831 given birth to a child, of whose conception she did not get aware of for some con-
535 siderable time. The people who come to this dance are far fewer; it does not last
786 as long either. In stead of a bull only a goat is killed by the relations of the woman, and some beer is brewn for the feast. Other ceremonies are the same as after child-birth under usual circumstances.

Betrothal and Marriage.

584 Before any other arrangements are made, a boy intending to get married tells his parents that he wants to look out for a partner through life. If the father has any cattle towards the dowry he will agree, and tells his son to make his choice, and inform her relations. When he has found a likely girl he invites a couple of friends, one of whom at least knows the relations of the girl well
● [882] *(jatielo)*. With his friends he pays a visit to the kraal of the girl, and enters the *simbu* i. e. the hut in which the boys of the kraal live.

No sooner have they entered the *simbu* or the girls of the place go to greet the visitors, after which they bring them pipes and tobacco and go to fetch or prepare some gruel for them to drink. In the meantime the *jatielo* goes to the hut of the particular girl's father to tell him that a friend of his has come for his daughter. *The father will inquire from the jatielo* what kind of lad the boy is, whether he is of good family, whether he is not the son of a witchdoctor, whether he can pay a decent dowry, ect.

If the father agrees the *jatielo* goes back to his friends in the *simbu* and reports that the father is willing, whereupon the boy proposes to the girl. There and then the girl decides whether she agrees or not. If she does not want the boy, then all is finished and visitors go home at once. If she agrees, they stay for the night. They sleep in the *simbu* seperately together with the other boys and girls.

583 Then, in former years, in the early morning the visitors would catch the girl after she had left the *simbu*, and take her to her fiance's village *(muko)*. On account of a government regulation, by which the dowry is now more or less fixed, this practice is no longer adhered to.

583 The boy and his friends go home. He informs his parents, who next day
585 send the *jatielo* back with somebody else to pay the first instalment of the dowry, usually 2 or 3 head of cattle. They stay over the night, and in the morning they catch *(muko)* the girl, for she pretends not to like going along. After they have had some gruel to drink, the boys who brought the cattle more or less drag her out of the kraal. The girls from her village strip her absolutely naked, and the boys from there follow those who fetch the girl to take from them some of their orna-

14: Johnston G-4, 5 (no date) 1904 FL11 Luo FL11

101 174 inhabited Northern Unyoro (where a fragment of them remains), and that the Bahima and their Bantu subjects drove this branch of the Nilotic people across the Albert Nile to the north-west (where they remain as the Aluru) and into Busoga (across the Victoria Nile) on the south-east. From Busoga they appear to have been driven on by the Bantu right through the Kavirondo country until they finally settled and throve round the shores of Kavirondo Bay, where they at present bear the name of Ja-luo or Nyifwa. It is a remarkable fact that the Ja-luo to this day are

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called by their Bantu neighbours "Abanyoro," which would indicate that this theory of their origin is correct.

361 The Ja-luo reside in fixed villages of from ten to fifty huts, which are surrounded by hedges of aloe and euphorbia. Formerly they built mud [178] or stone walls round their settlements in imitation of the Bantu Kavirondo [312] to the north. But this is a custom which has now died out. The houses are similar in appearance to those of the Bantu tribes around them, as is the arrangement about the two fireplaces. Young unmarried girls usually 513 sleep together in one large hut under the care of an old woman. The 482 young men and boys of the village also sleep by themselves, generally

14: Johnston G-4, 5 (no date) 1904 FL11 Luo FL11

near the entrance to the village, so that they can watch over any attempt to steal cattle. The hut which is directly opposite the gate of the village is usually that of the principal wife of the village head-man. There is much the same superstition as among the Bantu Kavirondo about shutting the door of a house behind a person who has just left it.

Unmarried men go naked. Married men who have children wear a

small piece of goat skin, which, though quite inadequate for purposes of decency, is, nevertheless, a very important thing in etiquette; for a married man with a child must on no account call on his mother-in-law without wearing this piece of goat skin. To call on her in a state of absolute nudity would be regarded as a serious insult, only to be atoned for by the payment of goats. Even if under the new dispensation a man [e.g. a step had once; among the Bantu equivalent to divorce (q.v.) is common between husband and wife. (see p. 787-not discovered). - Ruthyrl]

17: Southall E-5 (1946-1947) 1952 FL11 Luo FL11

the herds and, by emulation of the age group next above them, slowly acquiring proficiency in the typical adult male pursuits, while the girls are drawn into the domestic tasks of the elementary family, food preparation and cooking, fetching water, and minding babies.

The young boys of a play group sleep together in the guest hut of a homestead when they no longer share their mother's hut at night. The girls sleep together in the hut of some widow of the group who is past childbearing age. This is the most important institution for the transmission of female culture. Girls only leave it at marriage, and till that time they are continuously trained in the adult roles expected of them. Boys at puberty build themselves bachelor huts (Dholuo *simbe*) in which they sleep and where they also entertain their girl friends. A group of young men makes a formal assignation with a group of mobile girls from a segment of another maximal lineage into which marriage is possible, and visits and entertainments are held to and from the one lineage territory to the other. The two groups pair off with one another into sex partnerships which last till the groups break up and reform. A youth graduates out of this company of *simbe* age-mates at marriage.

Authority over children rests jointly with the parents. That of the mother is likely to be the most effective in the early years, and she always holds a strong sanction in her manipulation and control of the food-supply. The father is ultimately responsible for the order of the family, and his discipline is stronger than the mother's as the children grow older. There is a relation of friendly intimacy between alternate generations. Children are on easy terms with their grandparents and will certainly use the latters' households as an escape from home discipline or as a more generous source of food if need or opportunity arises. Children are at no period encouraged to live away from home with other relatives, but parents allow them to circulate freely among a number of homesteads wherever they find the best welcome and the most plentiful food, among families which are usually both neighbours and close agnatic relatives. Brother and sister have no material reasons for conflict and there is a strong and lasting bond of affection and reliance between them, institutionalized in the symbolism of a number of ritual occasions, and linked to close important later relation to one another's children as mother's brother (*nen*) and father's sister (*awe*). Apart from parents, these are the only two consanguine relatives of the first ascending generation who are picked out by special kinship terms. The newly married woman is under the authority of her mother-in-law, and a man's relation to his wife's parents is marked by deep respect and avoidances. Ritual practices as well as personal attitudes emphasize the importance of fertility and virility,[1] and the value attached by a man to a numerous offspring and the ability of his wives to provide it. The Luo are aware of the male and female parts in procreation, but say that 'the woman's blood goes for nothing'. This seems a necessary inference from the nature of lineage organization rather than vice versa, for they would not argue that there is any tendency for children to resemble the father rather than the mother, nor do they permit marriage with close consanguine kin though of an unrelated lineage. It is

[1] e.g. the special rites which have to be carried out for a mobile girl dying unmarried, a wife dying without children, a widow dying before remarriage, a man dying when one of his wives is still childless, or a man dying before he has experienced normal intercourse, the latter being treated similarly to a female woman.

20:Ominde I-5 (ca. 1948) 1952
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the mother. Thus the adolescent girl enjoys the freedom of being able to do most of her domestic work independently. Unless strict discipline is exercised she spends much of her time meeting her male friends. The thought of marriage begins to assume a reality and to become an influential factor in her attitude and movements. The self-love which made its first conspicuous appearance during the preceding age now takes the form of an effort to make herself look more attractive. Holes may be made in the ears from which to suspend ear-rings, and all sorts of armlets or bands are worn round the wrists. Clothes or head-dresses of bright colours are specially chosen. Although the practice is fast dying out, girls of this age used also to be addicted to tattooing their backs. Better clothing is among the most pressing needs of adolescent girls, and their families must either make sacrifices or else persuade the girl to make do with what is available.

The attitude of the parents. The attitude of parents towards an adolescent girl is greatly concerned with her economic value and her ability to do domestic work efficiently. An added consideration is the girl's conduct, both in and outside the family circle.

Hence, a girl's ability to work well in the house gives her mother a satisfaction which finds an outlet in conversation with other women. The mother strives to put forward the merits of her daughter as well as her social conduct in the community, while the young girl becomes almost mistress of the house, her mother hardly touching the work—especially when there is more than one adolescent daughter. The shock experienced when the girl is married is a matter which some of the envious neighbours do not refrain from mentioning.

On the other hand, a daughter who is inefficient in domestic work is no credit to her mother's reputation.

20:Ominde I-5 (ca. 1948) 1952
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882 There is therefore frequent friction between some
593 mothers and daughters.

The father, while maintaining an interest of his own, does not exhibit his liking for his daughter so openly. The economic value of a girl to society is gauged by the extent to which a man may be excused his debts on the ground that after his daughter's marriage he will be able to pay them.

Allowances given to girls are not very generous despite the fact that daughters have a higher economic value than sons. There is a feeling that not much money should be lavished on someone who will not remain in the family to help the father in his old age. The main desire is to see the girl married, and it is a source of worry if she does not associate with men. The girl is also expected to be sociable towards neighbouring women, because if she is unpopular with them they might speak against her in the presence of her suitor or his relatives.

At this time disciplinary control by the parents slackens, since in order to contact men the girl requires a certain amount of freedom. Disciplinary measures may be exercised only in the event of misconduct, such as running away with a young man without notice to parents or having relations which are morally prejudicial to the community life. The mother, however, loses her dominating influence during the school age and the task of disciplining the older girl becomes the duty of the father or her older brothers.

The Sexual Life and Attitude of Adolescents

836 The sexual life of the adolescent is conditioned by the
883 prevailing social conventions on the nature of sexual relationship between males and females. Thus, though it may appear on the surface that Luo society makes no allowance for unrestricted sexual contact, in fact a

20:Ominde I-5 (ca. 1948) 1952
FL11 Luo FL11

raised against such raiders. It is considered a disgrace to be discovered as an accomplice in raids on the girls' sleeping quarters.

On attaining Maturity

The attainment of maturity among girls is marked by the first onset of menstruation. In the past this was kept very secret until several periods had been experienced, and even now its first occurrence is kept secret. Formerly, early preparations were made for it by instructing the girls about the physical changes involved.

The information regarding this important physiological happening used to be given by the old woman in whose hut the girls slept. At present the information is obtained largely from experienced women with whom the girls associate. In the past there was no initiation ceremony to celebrate the event, and today the position remains the same. Although the betrothal of a girl could take place as early as ten, the social attitude was and still is that girls should not be handed over to their husbands before attaining maturity. Even when the mutual handing over took place before this age, the girl was obliged to live in the home of some older woman until the advent of menstruation. It is still believed that premature marriage results in great weakness to the girl.

The social position of a girl on reaching maturity. The social position of the newly-mature girl is vague and uncertain. Any abnormality of mind, character or body, is a source of anxiety to her family. Moreover, as most girls marry between sixteen and eighteen, there is a tendency for ill-wishers to over-state the ages of girls above that limit, because the attitude of society towards them is similar to that adopted towards overdue goods. Those who fail to marry at an early age thus become subjects of scorn. So strong is the pressure exerted by

20:Ominde I-5 (ca. 1948) 1952
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this attitude that unmarried girls, as they grow older, are often forced to marry in the end by taking advantage of the institution of polygamy, which acts as a final method of absorption. Although she may live to an advanced age, a single girl is continually tormented by the fact that society does not approve of unmarried girls.

Restrictions. Traditionally, a mature girl is not allowed to enter her father's or her mother's sleeping place, especially if the mother is still giving birth to children. This restriction, although generally ignored by Christians, applies also to the wives of her uncles. Those who are her parents or parents by marriage do not go where a girl receives her male visitors. By custom this hut was built beyond view of the parents' huts and served as a sleeping place for boys. It is considered that a girl who has commenced associating with men should not enter her mother's or father's hut because she would interfere with their powers of reproduction.

Relationship with brothers. The fear of incest has led to the practice of keeping young women's activities as separate as possible from those of their brothers, but free association and conversation concerning their mutual interests generally takes place, since brothers and sisters retain an interest in each others' love affairs. From his sisters, a young man may be informed of things he wishes to know about his girl friend.

Pre-marital pregnancy. Cases of pre-marital pregnancy were very rare in the past, according to most of my informants. But this rarity was not due to the fact that sexual relationships were prohibited. Pregnancy among mature girls was apparently not infrequent from any strict moral code, but from the conscious effort of the girls themselves to guard against it. Because much importance was attached to virginity, it was a matter of personal pride and was carefully guarded. It was a great honour and a